FROM THE BOOKSHELF NO. 298 JULY 25, 1978
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"DUKE ELLINGTON IN PERSON" BY MERCER ELLINGTON

ANNCR: WHEN AMERICAN COMPOSER AND BANDLEADER DUKE ELLINGTON DIED IN MAY, NINETEEN SEVENTY-FOUR, HIS SON MERCER WAS SIMULTANEOUSLY ENGAGED IN PLANNING THE FUNERAL IN NEW YORK, AND IN PREPARING HIS FATHER'S FAMOUS ORCHESTRA FOR AN ENGAGEMENT IN BERMUDA. MERCER ELLINGTON HAD BEEN CLOSELY INVOLVED WITH HIS FATHER'S CAREER FOR MOST OF HIS LIFE, AND WAS STILL TAKING CARE OF IT AFTER DEATH.

NOW MERCER ELLINGTON, WITH THE HELP OF LONG-TIME ELLINGTON ASSOCIATE, STANLEY DANCE, HAS WRITTEN A BIOGRAPHY OF AMERICA'S FOREMOST JAZZ MUSICIAN. HERE WITH SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE BOOK, "DUKE ELLINGTON IN PERSON," IS VOA BOOK EDITOR ----------.

NARR: MERCER ELLINGTON'S BOOK IS SUBTITLED "AN INTIMATE MEMOIR." IT IS INTIMATE TO THE EXTENT THAT IT ACKNOWLEDGES HIS FATHER'S VARIOUS AMOURS, AND IN ITS TREATMENT OF THE LESS THAN INSPIRING BUT NECESSARY SELF-PROMOTION INVOLVED IN A MUSICAL CAREER. BUT THE TRUTH APPEARS TO BE THAT IF ANYONE HAD A TRULY INTIMATE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH DUKE ELLINGTON, HIS -- OR HER -- IDENTITY, REMAINS UNKNOWN. IN FACT, MERCER ELLINGTON TELLS US, BETWEEN THE LINES IF NOT EXPLICITLY, THAT THE ELLINGTON FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP WAS AN UNEASY ONE.

DUKE ELLINGTON WAS JUST TWENTY WHEN HIS ONLY CHILD WAS BORN. HE MADE NO SECRET OF FINDING THE PROSPECT OF PARENTHOOD A DISMAL ONE, AND NO SECRET, BEFORE OR AFTER THE FACT, OF

NARR: (CONT'D) HAVING PREFERRED TO HAVE A BABY GIRL. HE SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN A PERSON, WHO, THOUGH PRODIGIOUSLY GIFTED AND SUCCESSFUL, SHUNNED INTIMACY OF ANY KIND WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY SHOOTING OUT SIGNALS OF LONELINESS LEFT AND RIGHT. HE WOULD CRAVE CONTACT, AND DEMAND COMPANIANSHIP AT LONELY HOURS, BUT HOLD HIS "INTIMATES" -- INCLUDING SON MERCER -- ALWAYS AT ARMS LENGTH, NEVER WANTING THEM TO GET TOO CLOSE. AFTER HIS DEATH, MERCER TELLS US, HE FOUND A NOTE IN HIS FATHER'S PAPERS SAYING SIMPLY: "NO PROBLEM. I'M EASY TO PLEASE. I JUST WANT TO HAVE EVERYBODY IN THE PALM OF MY HAND."

ELLINGTON'S ALOOFNESS TOWARD HIS SON WAS MAINTAINED IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP AS WELL. MERCER STRUCK OUT ON HIS OWN NOW AND THEN, BUT SITUATIONS, SIMILAR TO THE ONE HE RELATES, HAPPENED MORE THAN ONCE.

VOICE: "POP NEVER ENCOURAGED OR DISCOURAGED ME, BUT HIS EVERY ACT WAS TO KEEP MY INTEREST IN ANOTHER BAND FROM AMOUNTING TO ANYTHING. HE HAD MADE UP HIS MIND, OUT OF SUPERSTITION, THAT IT WAS BAD LUCK TO HAVE TWO BANDS IN SHOW BUSINESS WITH THE SAME NAME... MY BAND WAS DOING VERY WELL AFTER POP HAD GIVEN US (VOCALIST) AL HIBBLER. WE WERE BOOKED SO STRONG THAT HE HEARD ABOUT IT AND SNATCHED HIBBLER BACK. I HAD SIGNED CONTRACTS TO PRODUCE HIBBLER, BUT NOW I COULDN'T MAKE THE DATES AND WAS SUED FOR TWO MONTHS. WE GOT INTO ALL SORTS OF PREDICAMENTS. MY FATHER WOULD NEVER DO ANYTHING OVERT OR BAD ENOUGH TO REALLY HURT, BUT IF MY FOOT SLIPPED, HE WOULD LET ME GO ALL THE WAY DOWN."

NARR: AFTER A FEW TALES SUCH AS THAT, AND HIS DESCRIPTION OF HIS HAPPINESS AT A GIFT FROM DUKE OF A NEW CAR -- IT BROUGHT THEM CLOSER TOGETHER BECAUSE HE THEN BECAME HIS FATHER'S CHAUFFEUR -- WE BEGIN TO WONDER WHICH ELLINGTON WE ARE HAVING AN INTIMATE GLIMPSE OF.

BUT THERE ARE MORE PLEASANT, LESS DISTURBING, ASPECTS TO MERCER'S BOOK. ASIDE FROM THE USUAL, ALWAYS ENTERTAINING, ANECDOTES OF THE ITINERANT MUSICIAN'S LIFE, THERE ARE MANY "BEHIND THE SCENES" LOOKS AT THE EVOLUTION OF MANY OF ELLINGTON'S FAMOUS COMPOSITIONS.

VOICE: "HIS WORLD HAD BEEN BUILT AROUND HIS MOTHER, AND THE DAYS AFTER HER DEATH WERE THE SADDEST AND MOST MORBID OF HIS LIFE... HIS GREAT LOSS AFFECTED HIS MUSICAL OUTPUT MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE THAT HAPPENED IN HIS CAREER. HE LOST HIS AMBITION BECAUSE HE HAD LOST THE PERSON HE MOST LIKED TO PLEASE. HE BROODED A LONG TIME, AND THE FIRST SIGN THAT HE WAS COMING OUT OF HIS DESPAIR WAS "REMINISCING IN TEMPO," A FOUR-PART RECORDING IN WHICH HIS MOOD ALTERNATED FROM THE SADNESS OF THE PRESENT TO THE HAPPY MEMORIES OF THE PAST HE HAD SHARED WITH HIS MOTHER..."

NARR: MERCER ALSO DISCUSSES IN SOME DETAIL THE RACIAL THEMES OF SUCH ELLINGTON STANDARDS AS "BLACK AND TAN FANTASY," "BLACK, BROWN AND BEIGE," AND THE SHOW "JUMP FOR JOY."

VOICE: "WHERE "JUMP FOR JOY" WAS CONCERNED, IT SHOULD BE QUITE CLEARLY STATED NOW THAT WHEN HE WROTE IT ELLINGTON MEANT IT ABSOLUTELY AND DEFINITELY AS AN INDICTMENT OF THE SOUTH, BUT NOT PERHAPS IN A STRICTLY GEOGRAPHIC SENSE. 'THE SOUTH'

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VOICE: (CONT'D) WAS COMMONLY A TERM FOR DEPICTING OVERWEENING BIGOTRY, SOMETHING CERTAINLY NOT CONFINED SOLELY TO THAT AREA. DURING HIS EARLY CAREER ELLINGTON HAD MET WITH MANY DISPIRITING INCIDENTS IN PLACES AS FAR NORTH AS BOSTON, MUNCIE, (INDIANA) CHICAGO, AND EVEN OUT WEST. SO IN 'JUMP FOR JOY' HE GAVE NOTICE THAT THE BLACK MAN WOULD NO LONGER STAY PASSIVE WHILE THESE THINGS PREVAILED."

NARR: THE LESS APPEALING SIDE OF DUKE ELLINGTON'S LIFE AND PERSONALITY, OR COURSE, ARE AS NOTHING COMPARED TO THE TOWERING MUSICAL STATURE OF THE MAN AND HIS WORKS. THOSE CLOSEST TO DUKE WILLINGLY SUFFERED HUMILIATION, COLDNESS, EVEN MEANNESS FROM HIM IN EXCHANGE FOR HIS UNCEASING TRUTH, WARMTH AND NOBILITY AS AN ARTIST IN MUSIC. ONE EXPECTS THAT EVEN MERCER ELLINGTON WILL FORGET, IN TIME, BEING ROBBED OF AL HIBBLER AND REMEMBER BEING GIVEN AN ENTIRE WORLD OF MAGNIFICENT MUSIC THAT IS LITERALLY -- IN ONE OF DUKE ELLINGTON'S PET PHRASES -- "BEYOND CATEGORY."

STANLEY DANCE, WHO COLLABORATED WITH MERCER ON THIS BOOK, ALSO SAID A GREAT DEAL IN A FEW WORDS ABOUT DUKE ELLINGTON IN THE EULOGY HE DELIVERED AT ELLINGTON'S FUNERAL.

VOICE 2: "I CERTAINLY WOULD NEVER PRETEND THAT I WHOLLY KNEW THIS WONDERFUL MAN, ALTHOUGH I SPENT MUCH TIME IN HIS COMPANY AND ENJOYED HIS TRUST. THE TWO PEOPLE WHO KNEW HIM BEST WERE HIS SON MERCER, AND HIS SISTER, RUTH, AND THEIR LOSS IS THE GREATEST OF ALL. OTHERWISE, HIS VARIOUS ASSOCIATES AND FRIENDS KNEW DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF HIM, BUT NEVER, AS THEY READILY ADMIT, THE WHOLE MAN."

ANNCR: WE MAY NEVER KNOW THE "WHOLE MAN" THAT WAS DUKE ELLINGTON BUT HIS SON, MERCER ELLINGTON, AND CO-AUTHOR, STANLEY DANCE, IN THEIR BOOK, "DUKE ELLINGTON IN PERSON", HAVE GIVEN READERS MANY VALUABLE INSIGHTS INTO THIS COMPLEX PERSONALITY WHO WAS ONE OF AMERICA'S GREAT MUSICAL ARTISTS.

"DUKE ELLINGTON IN PERSON" WAS PUBLISHED BY HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN COMPANY OF BOSTON. YOUR BOOK EDITOR WAS----------AND------- AND---------READ SELECTIONS FROM THE BOOK.

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